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Miller makes self at home in House

Barbara Barrett, Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON - U.S. Rep. Brad Miller wants to soothe hearts and fight for people, and he figures that -- for now, at least -- the U.S. House of Representatives is the place to do it.

When Miller decided three weeks ago to forgo a shot at Sen. Elizabeth Dole's seat in 2008, he said that family ambivalence drove his decision.

But Miller, a third-term Democrat from Raleigh, also said he'll seek a fourth term in the House, telling reporters repeatedly, "I have a lot to say grace over."

Like most newer members of Congress, Miller hasn't had many big-name successes, and he's had the added challenge of being in the minority until this year.

So, after four years of trying to crack down on predatory lending, Miller hasn't yet saved thousands of homeowners from foreclosures with new, national consumer protections. This spring, he wasn't able to secure the half-million dollars Wake County wants for an environmental center.

But Miller is buoyed by the new Democratic majority and confident that, should he stick around the place, he'll build up successes.

"Although I think I probably could do more in the Senate, there's plenty I can do in the House and am doing right now," Miller said.

Miller, who served in the state legislature, came to Congress rooted in state-level politics. But he's keen on making a broader impact.

He helped create the historic preservation and community college caucuses in Congress.

In the Financial Services and Science committees, he has taken on national issues such as consumer financial protections and investigations of what he considers scientific fraud in the Bush administration.

He just earned a seat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, last week questioning administration officials about the months-long lags and mistakes in delivering millions of new passports.

"My work on consumer protection gives me the chance to comfort the afflicted. And my work on science and technology oversight gives me the chance to afflict the comfortable," Miller said.

Miller's future in the House will depend greatly on which party is in control. The difference with Democrats in charge, he said, is "day and night."

Now, when he introduces a bill, it isn't because he wants to send a message or strike a negotiating position. It's because he expects his bill to become law.

A busy year

His chief goal this year is enacting new consumer protections against predatory lending. Miller, along with Democratic Rep. Mel Watt of Charlotte, has spent years negotiating with community activists, bankers and lenders on the legislation.

He would have been able to do more last year had then-Majority Leader Tom DeLay not put an end to the talks, said Rep. Barney Frank, a Massachusetts Democrat and chairman of the House Financial Services Committee.

"Brad's a very thoughtful guy," Frank said. In another few terms, Frank said, Miller could have enough seniority to become the chairman of an important financial subcommittee or at least an influential member of the full committee.

In a few weeks, Miller hopes to introduce a bill that would overhaul predatory lending rules. He is working on another that would change bankruptcy law.

"It probably will be the most significant consumer legislation in more than a dozen years," Miller said. He said thousands of middle-class homeowners could be saved from foreclosures should the bills become law.

And Miller had heard privately that should the predatory lending bill pass the House, Senate Republicans would have tried to block it so he wouldn't have a success to run with against Dole. He thinks the bill has a better shot now.

This spring, Miller also took on the chairmanship of the Science Committee's new oversight panel. There, he has held hearings on an eclectic mix of issues: the destruction of a document at NASA, funding for an unproven defense aircraft and questions surrounding a Purdue University researcher's work on fusion.

"The Bush administration has not been held accountable by Congress for six years, and it shows," Miller said. "It shows in little corners of the federal government."

Miller also helped block funding for an executive rule by President Bush that Miller claims would have affected laws on the environment, civil rights, public health and other issues. The executive order would give political appointees greater control in writing regulations and

prohibits the federal government from tackling problems unless it can show private institutions haven't addressed the problems.

Wish list for Wake

When it comes to money for local projects, Miller has been less successful recently.

Miller's office says he has secured more than \$2 million in projects around his congressional district, including \$400,000 for Raleigh's city bus system. Congress wound up eliminating nearly all such directed spending -- called earmarks -- from its appropriations bills.

Also among those lost earmarks was \$100,000 for Wake County's new environmental education center last year. This year, the county has asked for, but not received, \$500,000 for the center, said Jennifer Willis, who handles state and federal relations for Wake County.

Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker said the city each year has at least a half-dozen items on its wish list, and that fewer have come through than he would like.

"The city has worked with Miller's office on funding issues, and frankly there's not been a lot of return on that," Meeker said.

Raleigh's wish list for this year contains projects totaling nearly \$40 million, for water projects, a senior center, emergency training and a historic preservation of the Pullen Park carousel.

Still, Meeker said he was glad that Miller wanted to stay in the House.

"Congress is a big institution with a lot of people, and it takes a while to build up seniority and get things done," Meeker said.

Tony Gurley, chairman of the Wake County Board of Commissioners, said Miller has been receptive to requests for local help.

And, Gurley said, Miller would be more helpful in his current role than had he jumped in the Senate race.

"More than he would be if he lost to Sen. Dole," Gurley said.